

# Increasing re-use by combining resources

How the Surrey Reuse Network enables its members to make a bigger impact on waste than they could do alone

**Since receiving the backing of Surrey County Council as part of its resource-led waste strategy, the Surrey Reuse Network has gone from strength to strength.**

**As a co-ordinated network, it is able to share resources and win large-scale local authority contracts for bulky waste collection. It is also now the primary supplier of goods to Surrey’s Local Assistance Scheme (LAS), the new crisis fund for people in real hardship, and making a sizeable contribution to the Council’s target of diverting 2,000 tonnes of furniture and white goods from landfill through re-use in the community.**

**Each of the individual Furniture Re-use Organisations (FROs) involved has seen their own returns increase, meaning they can help more people in need.**

*"After three years, the SRN has achieved more than we expected. Some members have doubled their incomes, increased tonnages and significantly increased the number of people they assist."*

Alex Green, Social Purpose Group. Interim Manager of the SRN

## At a glance

- Formally established in 2010; now a registered charity and company limited by guarantee
- Currently diverting ca.600 tonnes of furniture from landfill each year – up 22% in 2012-13 compared to 2011-12
- By combining resources, the FROs have been able to set up a single 0800 number and online booking system for collections, run joint communications campaigns and win local authority contracts
- Re-use shop leased to SRN achieved turnover of £30k+ in first six months
- Assisting over 5,000 low-income households, and offering volunteering/ work-based training opportunities to 400 people a year
- Benefited from invest to save approach from Surrey County Council



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## Background

For some years, a number of FROs in Surrey had been in contact with each other, sharing best practice and occasionally items for re-use. But in 2009, this informal network began to be transformed into something more concrete.

The catalyst was Surrey County Council (SCC), which had set itself an ambitious vision of waste management in the county: reducing household waste by 30,000 tonnes – with zero sent to landfill – and increasing re-use and recycling to 70%. One area identified for cutting back on waste and increasing re-use was furniture and white goods.

SCC had for some time provided informal support to FROs, and so was well aware of their value – not only in terms of its own waste ambitions but also for the support they deliver to local communities. However, while each local FRO worked effectively in its own local area, SCC recognised the potential was far greater: collection levels could increase, distribution become more co-ordinated and awareness amongst Surrey residents could soar.

In 2009, it therefore sought a means of enabling the FROs to work collaboratively to deliver more co-ordinated, efficient and effective re-use services across the county.

## Project aims and objectives

The underlying aims of the project were to increase furniture re-use across the county and reduce the volume sent to landfill. More specifically, SCC sought to:

- enable the FROs to work as a county-wide network, delivering co-ordinated services that would optimise re-use and provide a consistent, high-quality service for residents;
- build the capacity of individual FROs to handle greater volumes of furniture and white goods; and
- raise public awareness of the potential for re-use and increase access to it, so that people would understand it as readily as they understand recycling.

Partners involved	
Surrey Waste Partnership	Local re-use organisations
Surrey County Council 11 district & borough councils	Camberley Community Store Furniture Helpline Furnistore Guildford Furniturelink Kingston Community Furniture The Vine Project Woking Community Furniture Project

## Project approach

It was clear from the start that the key to success would be through collaboration – allowing the FROs to benefit from a greater combined strength and resources. Therefore, SCC’s approach was to support and enable capacity building through collaboration led by the FROs.

### Getting FROs on board

The first step was to secure the agreement of the local FROs to join a more formal network. SCC put forward a package of support for all members, including upfront grants to help build capacity and quarterly furniture re-use credits. The Council also agreed to fund a county-wide communications campaign and provide ongoing marketing support, as well as part-funding an Interim Manager. To receive this support, the Board of Trustees of each FRO was asked to commit in writing to be part of a ‘Surrey Reuse Network’ (SRN).

### Agreeing an operational structure

The next essential step was to agree how the SRN should be structured. Drawing on advice from REalliance, it was proposed to establish SRN as a legal entity – a constituted membership network, with its own board and ‘constitution’.

A Memorandum of Understanding was drafted and agreed, to aid with governance and decision-making, and plans put in place for the SRN to become a registered charity and a company limited by guarantee.

### Building capacity

One of the key principles of the SRN’s constitution was that each member would retain autonomy: the SRN would be complementary to the FROs, rather than replacing them.

To help each member grow, WRAP-funded independent consultants carried out a review of their business – looking at strengths and weaknesses in ten key areas, and providing individual guidance and advice. This served to build capacity in the network as a whole.

### Developing and implementing a business plan

An Interim Manager, part funded by WRAP, was appointed with a clear remit to develop a three-year strategic plan for the SRN. This included not only goals and objectives but also specific detail on how these would be delivered, including timescales, budgets and responsibilities – drawing on the different skills and strengths of different members. It set out some vital workstreams that the members had agreed, including setting up a shared 0800 number for people requesting collections, developing a website and undertaking communication campaigns to raise awareness of reuse in general, and the SRN in particular.

“Having a plan that everyone signed up to was essential,” says Alex Green of the Social Purpose Group, who acted as interim manager. “It meant that all parties had agreed on a set of actions at the start, which meant we didn’t have to keep seeking approval for every step. All the FROs were part of it, and the SRN could then act on their behalf.”

### Building relationships

From the outset, there was a clear ambition amongst the FROs and SCC to use the combined capacity of the network to bid to provide public services such as bulky waste collections from households and resale of re-usable items from HWRCs. The Interim Manager actively sought to build relationships with contracting authorities and other Council departments, which in turn helped SRN to be integrated in the delivery of the service across the county. Those core relationships also proved vital when SRN applied to become as a supplier of goods to Surrey’s Local Assistance Scheme.

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## Key challenges

### Balancing agility with solid governance

To seize some of the opportunities available to it, the SRN has to be able to act fast – and make decisions without recourse to multiple boards of trustees of each FRO. At the same time, transparency and solid governance are essential for all parties involved.

- A senior representative of each FRO was appointed to the board of the SRN, which in turn had the authority to make decisions that directly corresponded to issues in the original business plan. In this way, decisions could be made quickly while still ensuring each FRO was represented in those decisions.

### Keeping feet on the ground

Funding the SRN was a far-sighted approach from SCC, as it required an 'invest to save' model – essentially paying up-front to help build the capacity of the network and individual members. It was crucial that they made such investments with realistic expectations.

- SCC wanted to divert 2,000 tonnes of furniture and white goods from landfill every year. Whilst this remains the long-term goal, the Interim Manager and other SRN representatives worked closely with SCC to agree more realistic short term targets. These have been exceeded.

### Adapting processes to deliver the right services

As individual organisations, each FRO can essentially set its own rules. Many therefore simply cherry-pick re-usable items from an HWRC or house clearance, and leave the rest. When providing a bulky waste collection service, this approach is no longer appropriate: all items must be taken away, and then sifted through later.

- Organisations had to agree to adapt their processes so that all items were collected. SCC supported this, with the offer of free disposal of surplus items (except those received from house clearances); partners also worked together to share out items which others might use.

### Coping with success

After a while, it became clear that the SRN was in danger of becoming a victim of its own success – at least in the eyes of some of the FROs. Because so much was being achieved under the SRN banner, some FROs began to express concern that the SRN was in danger of competing with them.

- Referring back to the original constitution, SRN restated its core aim of developing opportunities with and for its FRO members; using the combined strength to drive new business for all.

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## Project outcomes and outputs

Three years in, and SRN has exceeded initial expectations. Year on year, the tonnages collected for diversion from landfill by SRN and its members have increased by 158%, with a total of 660 tonnes collected in 2012-13. Diversion to re-use is up by 22% and recycling by 100% compared to 2011-12. Items collected are either passed onto low-income households – around 5,000 families benefit each year – or are sold through FRO shops.

This increase has been achieved through network members operating bulky collections for Guildford Borough Council and Elmbridge Borough Council as well as diversion of re-usable items from a number of HWRCs. These have generated additional income and customer feedback has been very positive.

In early 2013, SRN was appointed as the primary supplier of goods to Surrey’s Local Assistance Scheme (LAS), the new crisis fund for people in real hardship. Through this innovative partnership between SCC and SRN, the first of its kind in the country, SRN is to provide 4,000 items annually to the fund.

A new SRN shop was opened in 2012: SRN acquired the lease but all goods are supplied by members and income distributed to them. In its first six months of operation, the shop achieved a turnover in excess of £30,000.

Other shared services include the 0800 number and website, both of which have proved popular. Over 8,500 enquiries were made by phone in 2012-13, and a new online form for booking a collection was recently launched. During a six-month pilot, almost 1,000 bookings were submitted online. These are then forwarded direct to the relevant SRN member, based on location.

Three communication campaigns have been run in partnership with SCC, and each has led to an increase in awareness of re-use in general and the SRN in particular. Shops also report substantially increased footfall and more donations for re-use during and after the campaigns.

All six of the original members are still involved and two more have joined. Through the SRN, some report that they have doubled their income and significantly increased the number of customers they can help.

For SCC, the benefits are equally apparent. As well as the obvious benefit of increased diversion from landfill, it is also pleased to be supporting FROs, who in turn support low-income households and provide valuable volunteering and work placement opportunities.

The SRN has recently refreshed its business plan for the next three years, and its ambitions continue to grow. Drawing on the evidence of its success, and its experience over the last three years, SRN members were able to put forward new objectives which will take the network forward.



Communication materials produced by SRN

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## Key Learning Points

- **A plan is crucial.** Agreeing what you want to achieve – and how you want to achieve it – up-front allows a network to keep moving and not get bogged down in constant discussions.
- **Focus on the benefits.** The fundamental reason for setting up a network is to bring in more 'business' for its members. Every action should be measured against this yardstick: if it's not working, change it.
- **Look to the long term.** Without SCC's commitment to long-term returns – embodied in its willingness to 'invest to save' – the SRN wouldn't have happened. A clear understanding of the long-term benefits is therefore a vital foundation.
- **Get the governance right.** It's essential to have a leadership and governance structure that reflects the network's goals. In Surrey's case, that meant finding a way to enable decisions to be made for the collective good quickly: the governance structure enables that.
- **Remember it's only part of the picture.** All organisations within a network continue to run their operations outside it. Make sure the network doesn't become top-heavy and perceived as a threat to members.
- **A dedicated project manager can make a big difference.** It's well worth appointing someone to take responsibility for making the project happen. A dedicated project manager is able to focus on the task, rather than on other work, and can act as a vital intermediary to bring the different organisations together. In this case the post was initially funded by both SCC and WRAP.



**SRN now has successful shops across Surrey and is the primary supplier of goods to Surrey's Local Assistance Scheme (LAS)**

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This is one of a series of case studies highlighting the benefits of local partnership organisations working alongside each other to increase re-use. Other case studies in this series can be found on WRAP's website: [www.wrap.org.uk/reusecasestudies](http://www.wrap.org.uk/reusecasestudies) and feature the following areas projects:

- Bucks;
- Leeds; and
- Leicestershire

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